



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ATONEMENT IN NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS.

By GEORGE S. GOODSPEED,
The University of Chicago.

III. DEVELOPMENT OF ATONING PRACTICES IN ANCIENT RELIGIONS.

35. To PRESENT clearly the two types of atonement already discussed¹ it has been necessary to isolate them from one another, and out of the illustrations employed to select the traits which exhibit the particular type under consideration. As a fact, historical religion seldom offers a distinct and generic form of either, but for the most part a mixture of the two. One or the other predominates, and is modified by its fellow, which retains its hold in minor elements of the ritual, whereby these often fit clumsily into the main body. Thus, for example, in the camel sacrifice described by Nilus and already alluded to (par. 28) the central act is the pouring out of the blood to the god; the devouring of the raw flesh has lost its essential meaning as an atoning feast upon the body of the god. It is the purpose of this paper to consider the growth of these atonement principles in historical religion, to indicate some of the forces which have modified their working, and to present further instances of their appearance in combination in ritual practices.

I.

36. A series of social and political changes are first to be noticed which stimulated and emphasized the practices which we have associated under the first of these principles, the atonement of fear. The growth of property rights out of the earlier communism is not the least among these. How notions of property influenced this ritual has already been observed (par. 12). It is no longer a question of knitting up loose strands in the divine-human community. Now man has something which he can give,

¹ BIBLICAL WORLD, January, 1901, pp. 22-31; February, 1901, pp. 96-106.

and God can make demand for what is his. The legal or commercial aspects of the relations emerge. The old Roman religion was of this type. "The gods confronted man just as a creditor confronted his debtor; each of them had a duly acquired right to certain performances and payments;"² or, again: "The gods were partners in a contract with their worshipers."³ Compensation for affronts committed was made by sacrifice, which, as Baring Gould says, "is in religion what mulct is in law."⁴

37. The change from nomadic and pastoral life to settlement and the pursuit of agriculture, a stage through which all ancient peoples passed, had a similar effect upon atoning practices. The deity tends to become more and more the lord of the land; and the dwellers upon it, while they retain their consciousness of unity with him, are led to recognize the products of the soil and the fruit of their flocks and herds, along with the rain and sunshine, as his peculiar possession, which he graciously bestows upon his worshipers. But some return is to be made for these gifts, and what more fitting than portions of those things which he has himself provided? When his people come to the sanctuary with their offerings, those of the vegetable kind are handed over to the god as due him, but in the case of the animals the ritual of worship is summed up in the sacrificial meal, in which the offerings are religiously eaten by the worshipers before the gods.⁵ This is merely indicative of the fact that the communion atonement is partially retained in connection with the animal offering by the custom of a common feast at the sanctuary of the god, while the vegetable gifts, products of settled conditions of life under the superintendence of the divine master of the soil, are paid over in full to him.

38. Coincident with transformation from nomadic to settled life was the passage from the tribe to the more stable and compact national organization with the king at the head of the state. In this situation the god took on himself the character of supreme authority, and the worshiper became his subject, paying

² MOMMSEN, *History of Rome*, I, pp. 233 ff. ³ DILL, *Roman Society*, etc., p. 63.

⁴ *Origin and Development of Religious Belief*, I, p. 372.

⁵ W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*², p. 346.

that tribute which his lord demanded, doing homage to his heavenly ruler as the condition of standing well with him.

39. The most exalted offering to such a royal god would be that of the life of his subject. An illustration of the mixture of ideas in such a human sacrifice is given in certain Mexican rites, where the victim was regarded as divine and his body eaten sacramentally; yet he went willingly to his death, and even named the day for it, because thereby he could hope for greater favor and a happy reception with the gods.⁶ The prevalence of religious suicide in India, the most striking example of which appears in the rites of Jagannath, has one of its roots in this aspect of sacrifice. It is self-immolation to the divine lord. Probably the passing away of the primitive idea of killing the king (par. 30) is due to the increasing importance of the state and of the king as its head. Frazer gives some of his most interesting pages to a discussion of this point.⁷ Sometimes the king grew strong enough to abolish the custom by his own fiat. In other cases a human substitute was provided who suffered in his stead; or he went into retirement for a season, during which time a mock ruler occupied the throne and was removed from it by a mock execution.

40. In the ancient oriental world the agricultural kingdoms gave way in course of time to the great empires, like those of Egypt and Assyria, in which the ruler took a correspondingly exalted position. The gods of such states were likewise great monarchs, whose majesty and might were terrible to the common man. Access to the deity was hedged about with complex ceremonies, if, indeed, it were possible at all. Two results followed. Either atonement with such a deity was possible only by the mediation of a lesser divine power who would convey the prayer of the worshiper to the presence of the transcendent lord, or some extraordinary religious act was required to obtain standing at his court. Thus atonement came to be a much more serious affair, and its successful issue girt about with greater complications and uncertainties. This gloomier prospect was deepened by the inevitable concomitant of the rise of the great

⁶ SCOTT, *Sacrifice*, etc., pp. 94 f.

⁷ *The Golden Bough*, I, pp. 218 ff.

monarchies, the overthrow of the lesser nationalities and the disappearance of their religions. The people were thereby thrown, as it were, on their own resources in the matter of religion, or forced into the alien and unfamiliar cultus of a transcendent deity, as just described. The situation could not but associate itself with a sense of burden and insufficiency in their minds which was at the farthest remove from the prevailing religious sentiment of the old agricultural state, and betokened a new stage of atoning practice.⁸

41. Moreover, men had been progressing, not only in social life and political organization, but in breadth and depth of moral sentiment. The breaking up of the tribal relation in which the individual was altogether subordinated to the larger whole and found his *raison d'être* only as contributing to its continuance and prosperity, resulted in giving him more independence. The newly enlarging opportunities of trade and commerce brought him forward with new demands and new importance in the community. Hence came a higher regard for human life, which found its counterpart in religion by ascribing a new sanctity to the individual life and by revealing an increasing reluctance to employ human sacrifice in securing atonement. Ancient religion also had provided only for the body politic. The religious activities of the common man were merged in the public cult. But his demand for individual rights in the new communities coincided with his need of personal religious satisfaction, for which that public cult provided nothing. The great gods of the nation likewise began to feel that moralizing process which had accompanied the transformation of tribal custom into national law and of the loose administration of the tribal chieftains into the judiciary institutions of the nation. They gave their sanctions to these institutions and reflected the higher moral character which was exhibited in all the life of the state. In fine, the whole course of society was toward a higher moral plane, reflected in the political and religious life, where the individual was to claim his place and prerogative. King and subject, god and worshiper, alike entered upon

⁸ W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*², pp. 258, 348 f.

a new relation in which the moral demand assumed a controlling position.

II.

42. At this point appears the beginning of those practices which are known as "atoning" strictly so called (par. 1). The sense of fear is transformed into the feeling of ill-desert. An act has been committed against a god who sanctions right and punishes wrong; hence the doer is culpable. Justice must have its way, and punishment must be inflicted unless atonement is made. How this change came about is not difficult to understand. The struggle through which the individual obtained his rights and standing in the community was long and severe. In its process he found, as has been remarked, nothing to help him in the national religion, rather it was against him; and this situation tinged his religious sense with gloom. Similarly the overthrow of the national religions in western Asia consequent on the spread of the great empires darkened the horizon of the many whose relation to the gods was thus violently ruptured, and the individual lost even his slight hold upon the ancestral deities, whose attitude toward him had been growing in constraint. And the fact that the conception of God had been ethically advancing gave to all this situation a moral coloring. Thus the sentiment was felt that heaven was fundamentally estranged by man's unworthiness. The individual must seek some new means to satisfy divine justice adequate to his own sense of guilt and his desire for pardon and reconciliation.⁹

43. A primary position taken was that the sinner was forfeit to God. Self-immolation, the punishment of death, was the only adequate penalty and sufficient atonement. But human life had become too precious thus to take it, even in such strenuous conditions. On the other hand, animal life had largely lost its sacredness. Hence came a new outburst of animal sacrifices with a changed meaning. They were substitutions for human beings worthy of death.¹⁰ They were slain as offerings for sin, the death securing atonement for the worshiper who was himself put to death in the slaughtered animal. Thus pardon was sought and found.

⁹ RÉVILLE, *Prolegomena of the History of Religions*, English translation, p. 134.

¹⁰ W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*², p. 366.

44. Professor W. Robertson Smith has brought out with a great wealth of illustration the fact that animal sacrifice lent itself to the theory of atonement through death by reason of the survival in the ritual of much that pointed back to the communion atonement, *i. e.*, the conception that the animal was the god and was slain as such (par. 23). The new interpretation saw in all the solemn details of the old sacrifice (par. 22–29) the sense of guilt symbolized; in the care to burn or bury or consume all parts of the victim, the intense desire to get rid of all sin. Professor Smith has also shown clearly how it was equally impossible to bring all its elements under the new category without falling into absurdities. He calls attention also to a class of atoning rites in which guilt is wiped away by a revival of the old communion praxis in what are called mystic sacrifices. The animals offered were unclean animals, like the swine, dog, mouse, vermin; the rite was a mystical communion in the body and blood of a divine animal, and appears always to have had an atoning efficacy.¹¹ In such rites as these the religious need of individuals was feeling after satisfaction, for, as Professor Smith adds, the rites “are no longer the exclusive possession of particular kins,” as was the primitive communion rite (par. 20), “but are practiced by men who desert the religion of their birth as a means of initiation into a new religious brotherhood, based, not on natural kinship, but on mystical participation in the divine life held forth in the sacramental sacrifice.”¹² Some¹³ would make the prominent feature of the religion of the time — the sixth century B. C.—this tendency “to discard the gift theory of sacrifice and seek a closer communion with God” in these brotherhoods in which the communion atonement was revived.

45. The most striking exhibition of this form of atonement is seen in the Greek mysteries.¹⁴ In the private mysteries

¹¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, art. “Sacrifice,” Philadelphia edition, Vol. XXI, p. 445.

¹² W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*², p. 358.

¹³ Notably JEVONS, *Introduction*, etc., p. 333.

¹⁴ On the mysteries *cf.* *Ency. Brit.*, art. “Mysteries” (by RAMSAY); JEVONS, *Introduction*, chaps. xxiii and xxiv; DYER, *The Gods in Greece*, chap. v; WHEELER, *Dionysus and Immortality*, pp. 30 ff.; CHEETHAM, *The Mysteries, Pagan and Christian*, chap. iv.

participation was open to all who desired it. There was a ceremony of initiation, in which the candidate was wrapped in the skin of a sacred animal, and purified by water, or by a mixture of clay and bran; then he uttered the words: "Bad have I escaped, and better have I found;" whereupon he was admitted to the mystery itself, which was a sacramental meal presumably in the body and blood of the god. Of the public mysteries the most famous were the Eleusinia, the ancient ritual of which was of this same communion character. The new teaching connected with this form of religious ceremonial was the doctrine of a future life, in which reward and punishment were meted out according to one's deeds in this life; as an incentive to virtue the holy things of the god were exhibited to the worshiper, and the privilege was given him to enter into communion with deity, wherein was assured happiness for this world and the next. Purification, communion, salvation, future blessedness—these are the notes of this religious movement whose beneficent influence upon Greek life was deep and lasting, at least in fruitful indirect issues. Greek tragic poetry had its starting-point in association with the mysteries, and its moral elevation in the hands of the great masters Æschylus and Sophocles has commanded the admiration of the world. The latter poet, indeed, carries the unconscious prophecy of the mysteries to its highest expression in the touching words of Œdipus, called upon to perform a sacrifice of purification. To Antigone and Ismene he says:

I may not go. Two evils press on me,
My failing strength and loss of power to see;
Let one of you go on and do these things,
For one soul working in the strength of love
Is mightier than ten thousand to atone.¹⁵

46. Although the advancing moral sentiment was averse to human sacrifice and substituted for it the sacrifice of animals, yet the strong sense of guilt now aroused sought atonement, not only through mystic communion, but, as a last resort, in the extraordinary sacrifice of a human being. This demand of a human victim as an expiation for sin is the explanation of the

¹⁵ *Œdipus at Colonus*, Plumptre's translation, ll. 495-9 (*cf.* also Plumptre's remarks, pp. lxxxv f.).

continuance, or rather the revival, of human sacrifice among the classical peoples at a time when cereal oblations and animal offerings were the recognized means of securing the favor of the gods. There can be no doubt of the existence of this practice both in Greece and at Rome, and it continued far down into the Roman imperial times.¹⁶

47. This sketch of the development of atoning practices has emphasized the immense significance of the growth of morality in its influence upon the rituals of ancient religion. They were not transformed, indeed, though in many cases modified. The important change was in their interpretation and in the emphasis upon details. Everywhere the sense of sin sharpened the anxiety to be right with God, and intensified the power of those practices which by their sacredness or mystery seemed to promise expiation and peace. Not the satisfaction of a friendly god nor the reconciliation with an offended deity was the prominent thought; rather, in acknowledgment of guilt to come to terms with a righteous judge—this was the atonement sought. That thus the way was opened toward a higher union of God and man cannot be doubted. These religious acts “contained from the first germs of eternal truths, not only expressing the idea of divine justice, but mingling it with a feeling of divine and human pity. The dreadful sacrifice is performed, not with savage joy, but with awful sorrow, and in the mystic sacrifices the deity suffers with and for the sins of his people, and lives again in their new life.”¹⁷ Of the forms taken in the search after such atonement mention has been made from time to time in the preceding pages, but so various and instructive are these notions, such as those of mediation and substitution, that a separate and concluding paper may profitably be devoted to them.

[*To be continued.*]

¹⁶ On human sacrifices in the classical period *cf.* MAGEE, *Dissertations*, I, pp. 96 ff.; W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*, p. 366.

¹⁷ *Ency. Brit.*, art. “Sacrifice.”